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Letter of Intent

The Effectiveness and Ethicality of Online Counselling

CAAP Final Project Requirement

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## The Effectiveness and Ethicality of Online Counselling

### *Problem Statement*

Currently, online counselling is being offered even though experts disagree whether online counselling is effective, or even ethical. For instance, some counsellors and psychologists warn that online counselling or therapy is a contradiction in that it is missing certain critical elements (verbal and non-verbal communication) considered essential to counselling and psychotherapy (Segall, 2000, p. 40). On the other hand, Skinner (2004) states, “preliminary indications are that counseling via the Internet can be effective and convenient” (p. 440). Cook and Doyle (2002) highlight that online forms of counselling continue to grow, and increasing numbers of people are looking for online psychological support. This is complicated by the numerous ethical and methodological problems that are associated with the provision of psychological services online. With these problems in mind, a systematic and comprehensive review of the existing literature is needed to help resolve whether the growth of online counselling should be supported. The current growth of this form of counselling makes this comprehensive analysis and ethical examination extremely important and relevant.

### *Project Rationale*

“The mental health profession is unprepared for the possibility that within a few years there may be as many people seeking professional counseling over the Internet as there are looking for it face-to-face” (Alleman, 2002, p. 199). Unfortunately, to debate whether online counselling and therapy should be offered is a moot point at this time. Several people and agencies are currently offering online mental health services which appear to be readily accessed by the public. Chester and Glass (2006) state “the growth of the online counselling phenomenon

is indicated by the increase in clients, with the average number of clients, together with the number of practitioners, tripling over a 3-year period” (p. 155). Based on the exponential growth of this questionable form of counselling, examination at this point is critical. The Canadian Psychological Association’s Ethical Code (CPA, 2000) stresses the importance of responsible caring and risk analysis concerning new interventions and procedures. Principle II.16 states that psychologists should:

Seek an independent and adequate ethical review of the balance of risks and potential benefits of all research and new interventions that involve procedures of unknown consequence, or where pain, discomfort, or harm are possible, before making a decision to proceed (CPA, 2000).

With this in mind, it is the ethical responsibility of psychologists considering online practice to review this area carefully. This projects review of the existing literature on this topic will clarify potential risks and benefits involved and help provide guidance on how psychologists and counsellors should proceed.

In addition, the growth of online counselling has sparked a strong need for ethics boards to address this evolution in the practice of psychology. Robson and Robson (2000) stress that “professional counselling bodies need to address this topic and if necessary to adapt their codes of conduct to help to ensure that potential and actual clients are not exploited” (p. 256). In response to this concern, the ethical codes of many of the leading bodies in the psychological realm have begun to make more specific mention of online services in their ethical codes. Specifically, the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) has begun to address this through posting a draft of their Ethical Guidelines for Psychologists Providing Psychological Services via Electronic Media on the CPA website (CPA, 2006). The CPA is currently requesting feedback

and comments to help with the development of these guidelines. With this in mind, this project will also serve to assist the CPA and other mental health organizations with the development of ethical codes that address emergent electronic forms of counselling and therapy.

### *Supporting Literature*

Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zack (2004) emphasize that there has been a tremendous growth in the amount of research and literature that examines the field of online mental health. Online methods have been evaluated for family therapy (King, Engi, & Poulos, 1998), HIV-positive individuals (Reeves, 2000), eating disorders (Zabinski, Pung, Wilfley, et al., 2001), sports psychology (Zizzi & Perna, 2002), and the general population (Metanoia, 2006). Researchers have also examined online counselling with respect to public opinion (Finn, 2002), counsellor-client bond formation (Cook & Doyle, 2002), clientele (Suler, 2001; Dubois, 2004), and ethical and legal issues (Shapiro & Schulman, 1996). This abbreviated list reflects the range of the literature that exists with respect to online counselling. Although there is variance in the specific focus of each of these articles, the majority acknowledge the need for more research and analysis in order to maintain ethical diligence. Considering this concern, a methodical examination of the existing literature will provide a strong foundation in which to make recommendations about the future of online counselling.

In addition, ethical codes have recently started to address online counselling as emergent areas of practice. The CPA's recent request for feedback on their draft concerning electronic media (CPA, 2006) can be viewed as direct request for this very project.

### *Project Procedures*

The project will be organized into four major sections. These four sections will be: introduction, literature review, synthesis of the literature, and conclusions/discussion. In the

introduction the problem will be introduced, and the rationale for the project will be given. The introduction will also serve to define online counselling and to point out differences and similarities between this form of counselling and other alternatives. In the literature review section, there will be a thorough review of the literature relevant to the subject of online counselling. Emphasis will be placed on the risks and benefits along with the related ethical concerns. In the third section, the existing literature will be summarized and examined using the CPA Code of Ethics (2000) as a guide. There will also be consideration given to the drafted ethical guidelines posted on the CPA website (CPA, 2006). In the conclusion/discussion section, the question about whether online counselling should be supported will be addressed. This section will also make note of any amendments that should be made to the CPA ethical guidelines. Generally, recommendations for the future of online counselling will be given.

#### *Potential Implications*

This project will provide guidance concerning the future of online counselling. By answering the question about whether or not online counselling should be supported, it is addressing an ethical responsibility of mental health practitioners and professional associations. This project will ultimately be beneficial to clients, practitioners, and organizations involved or considering involvement with electronic services. Clients will benefit by gaining understanding about the risks and benefits involved and will become better prepared to make informed decisions about online vs. face-to-face service selection.

Counsellors and psychologists will also benefit by further understanding the risks and potential benefits involved. This ensures that practitioners are upholding ethical responsibilities to their various professions. The CPA Code of Ethics (2000) stresses that psychologists maximize benefit and minimize harm along with provision of the best possible service for those

needing help. In order for psychologists to achieve this it is extremely important for them to stay abreast of emerging areas in the field. This project will benefit psychologists and other professionals through its critical analysis of online counselling and providing guidance concerning its use in the future.

Existing online mental health agencies will likely benefit in that they will be able to evaluate their services to ensure that they are operating in a safe and ethical manner. Professional associations will benefit from this project through consideration of the existing CPA Code of Ethics (2000). This will provide guidance in the development of ethical codes reflecting online practice in the future. Ultimately, changes to existing ethical codes will result in better services provided by practitioners, and better services received by clients.

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